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SUBJECT COMPARISON OF SOVIET AND VOA RADIO PROPAGANDA

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S U M M A R Y

1. The comparison of Soviet and Voice of America propaganda is intended to provide (a) clues to the mentality which shapes USSR propaganda techniques and (b) comparative material for the examination of U.S. propaganda techniques.
2. The resemblances between Soviet and American propaganda are greater than generally supposed. The differences are matters of degree, not of kind. The same universal values are invoked in both; both illustrate the same set of principles of effective propaganda; certain limitations are observed in both.
3. The differences in degree appear to be functions of the following psychological peculiarities:
 - a. Soviet conflict-mindedness, dichotomizing propensity, and class-mindedness.
 - b. American entertainment-mindedness, individualism, fact-mindedness, traditionalism, and defensive posture.

A. FOREWORD

This study is an impressionistic comparison; it is not based on statistical data. The impressions of Soviet propaganda are derived from several years of continuous observation (1947-51), but the observed sample of Voice of America broadcasts is much more limited--some 300,000 words, taken chiefly from the months of December 1950 and January 1951.

The differences are of interest from two standpoints:

1. Each of them raises a question as to propaganda policy. Wherever the Soviet policy or emphasis differs from ours, it may or may not be more effective than ours. An inventory of differences should provide a number of starting-points for examination of what propaganda methods are most effective.
2. The differences may be clues to the mentality of the Soviet propagandist, to his values, his beliefs, his mental limitations and vulnerabilities. These limitations and vulnerabilities were outlined in [redacted] the data of the present study may serve to round out the picture and underline certain aspects of those papers.

B. RESEMBLANCES

The resemblances between Soviet and American propaganda are great--much greater, probably, than most Americans realize. They derive from two principles: (1) the universality of

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the human value-system to which all propaganda necessarily appeals (the desires for peace, democracy, national independence, class justice, economic welfare, reliable knowledge, etc.), and (2) the common assumptions of propagandists as to the techniques they must use to be effective (clearness, simplicity, human interest, selection, slanting, avoiding obvious lies, distinguishing between rulers and people in an enemy nation, etc.) For a list of 33 similarities, see section D below.

Those differences which do exist are almost entirely differences of degree rather than of kind. For instance, one of the most extreme differences is in the amount of emphasis on free speech and other individual freedoms. But when Moscow occasionally mentions free speech, it resembles us in seeming to take it for granted that free speech is desirable, and in claiming that it has free speech and its opponents do not.

The similarity is in fact so great that it may well be due to something more than the realistic and universal exigencies of propaganda; it may also be due partly to mutual imitation as between hostile propagandists. A convergence-tendency is historically demonstrable; Communist propaganda is more like ours than it was in 1934, and ours is more like that of Moscow than it was in 1949. Hitler's propaganda was much closer to the general pattern in the 1930's than it was in the 1920's. The evidence suggests that there is such a thing as an international propagandists' culture, which like all cultures tends to accept its own assumptions uncritically, without empirical test. It may well be that some of the "principles of propaganda" which are more or less implicitly taken for granted by propagandists throughout the world would be found to be false if they were subjected to experimental study. For example, it may be that both we and the Russians underestimate the propaganda values of modesty and reasonableness.

C. DIFFERENCES

The observed differences between VOA and Moscow propaganda can be grouped under eight main headings:

1. Soviet Conflict-Mindedness

This term means not necessarily desire for war, but a tendency to assume a state of conflict as inevitable and to see everything else in terms of it. If there is a single key word in Soviet thinking and writing it is the word "struggle." Every economic effort, every attempt at negotiation, every honest difference of opinion between blundering human beings tends to become struggle-ized as it passes through the distorting lenses of the perceptual process in the Soviet mind. The person with different views is seen as a deadly enemy, and the way to peace is seen not in a meeting of minds but in a steel-like determination to expose the enemy's deceptions, to resist his aggressions, and perhaps, by implication, to destroy him if possible.

To some extent this type of thinking is characteristic of all nations engaged in the merciless game of power-politics. It has also been accentuated in our own country during the past few years, under the double impact of the atomic bomb and the danger of Soviet aggression; and there are some who fear that we have already become "as bad as the Russians" in our conflict-mindedness. The evidence of propaganda analysis, however, suggests that we still have a long way to go before reaching that point. The specific differences are as follows:

a. Greater frequency of denunciation. In average number of denunciatory words or ideas per minute, Soviet broadcasts greatly exceed ours. They fairly bristle with words like aggressor, warmonger, monopolist, imperialist, reactionary, incendiary of war, lackey, slander, treacherous. This is perhaps partly a mere matter of style. Our broadcasts are now decidedly hard-hitting on the whole, but in a more factual-sounding way and with fewer denunciatory epithets per sentence. It may well be that our style is fully as effective in smearing the enemy as the Soviet style is. But even if it is only a difference in style, that has some significance. It is as if the Soviet propagandists, taking their version of the conflict for granted, are unaware of the fact that they may have to prove their version to an unconvinced listener, and of the fact that he may be repelled by a frequency of verbal mud-slinging out of proportion to what he now believes to be realistic.

Of all the quantitative measures of conflict-mindedness this is probably the most significant as well as the most accurately measurable. It was the chief single difference between the propaganda of Hitler and Roosevelt during the pre-war years; Hitler denounced just about three times as often as Roosevelt did. It is also a useful measure of increasing war-mindedness; Roosevelt's denunciations during the period 1939-41 were much more frequent than during the period 1935-39.

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b. More military metaphors and words for physical violence. In Soviet propaganda there are more military terms such as camp, march, cadre, banner, hero, front, vanguard, rear, campaign, and also more words for physical violence such as crush, annihilate, unleash, strangle, cannonfodder, cannibal.

c. More words connoting suspicion. There is a special paranoid flavor in other favorite Soviet terms such as unmask, expose, plot, undermine, traitor, betray, forced to admit, not attempting to conceal, lie, slander. The underlying assumption seems to be that any appearance of innocence in the enemy is necessarily deceptive.

d. Fewer words representing the gentler virtues. In VOA broadcasts as contrasted with Moscow there is occasional occurrence of words of a radically different sort: kindly, decent, gracious, good, sympathy, mercy, compassion, humility, neighborliness. Moscow has a few words in this general meaning-area--friendly, cooperation, co-existence, etc.--but with the Soviets the field of the gentler virtues seems to be less differentiated than it is with us. (This is typical of the nature of differences of this sort. There is in Soviet propaganda a meaning-area corresponding to every major meaning-area in our propaganda, and vice versa; the differences show up in the degree of differentiation.)

The term "good will" is especially interesting in this connection. When it first appeared in the Stockholm Appeal in March 1950 it stuck out like a sore thumb. It was as un-Soviet as the complete absence of denunciation in the Stockholm Appeal. Both were apparently shrewdly calculated (perhaps by Ilya Ehrenburg, who was active in the Stockholm meeting) to appeal to non-Communist Westerners. The term "good will" continued to appear very frequently during the next several months, but only in connection with the Stockholm Appeal, and only in a stereotyped slogan-like fashion; it was an alien intrusion which never became assimilated into the body of Soviet propaganda.

e. Fewer words for moderation. The VOA is more likely to use words such as evolution, liberal, adaptability, elasticity, ethical restraint, and conversely, to condemn its enemies as extremist, died-in-the-wool, fanatical, dogmatic, grim.

f. Less reference to civilian life: home, children, etc. Ehrenburg is again an exception, but in Soviet propaganda as a whole, unlike the VOA, there is an almost total absence of terms such as Daddy, Santa Claus, doll, Christmas present, comfortable homes.

g. More terms for determination. The martial spirit of Soviet propagandists appears in expressions such as firmly confident, steeled in the struggle, iron discipline (frequent in Stalin's writings, but soft-pedaled in current propaganda for general consumption), peace forces, democratic forces, "we do not beg for peace, we demand it."

h. More terms for strength. For instance, mighty, bulwark, irresistible, invincible, triumph.

i. More terms for unity. For instance: unanimity, union, alliance, moral and political unity of the Soviet peoples, the peoples of the world are struggling for peace, the democratic camp, the-Soviet-Union-and-the-People's-Democracies. This is somewhat related to the claim of universal acceptance of the Soviet version of reality: as is known, everyone knows, the whole world knows. The VOA talks much about unity in the West, and also uses the "as is known" device, though probably not nearly as much as Moscow does. It may be that our total attention to unity is as great as theirs in view of our exceptional need for it at the present time.

2. American Entertainment-Mindedness

In America the entertainment industry accounts for a far larger part of the national income than in Russia, and has become closely allied to the art of verbal expression. It is understandable, then, that the Voice of America should greatly surpass Moscow in the entertainment-value which it provides. Specifically:

a. More human interest. The VOA talks much more about concrete individuals; it has more dialogue, more anecdotes, more drama. It relates itself more directly to the daily life of the listeners as individuals. Its commentators are more personalized, and express more personal feelings.

b. More humor. The number of outright jokes is far greater, satirical dramatic sketches are much more frequent, and the number of ironical twists in ordinary commentary is considerably greater.

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c. More variety. The VOA has far more variety in style of presentation and in the illustrations given to support major themes. It probably has a much more varied vocabulary. And it is also more varied (perhaps much too varied) in the subthemes which it uses to support its major themes. VOA writers seem much more sensitive to the possibility of boring their listeners by excessive repetition. This quality is good from the standpoint of keeping listeners especially those who have no strong political interest, but it raises a question as to whether a greater concentration of fire might bring greater results. We could be nearly as varied as we are now in the concrete illustrations we use to support a given subtheme (such as slave labor in the USSR, or the historical record of Soviet aggression) and still concentrate our fire on a smaller and more carefully selected set of subthemes.

d. Evaluations in terms of interest. The word "interesting" occurs in VOA broadcasts, and so do opposite terms such as "drab." They are almost if not completely absent from Soviet broadcasts.

3. American Individualism

a. Individual freedom. As mentioned above, one important difference between the two verbal value-systems lies in the emphasis given to individual freedom; Moscow claims to be in favor of it, but gives it only a tenth or a twentieth as much emphasis as the VOA does. This is the one great exception to the generalization that their basic criteria of evaluation (peace, democracy, national independence, economic welfare, etc.) are essentially the same as ours. It appears in the infrequency of the term "individual freedom" and related terms such as civil liberties, freedom of speech, freedom of press, freedom of religion, academic freedom, Bill of Rights, free expression. It also appears in the sheer frequency of the word freedom as compared with the word democracy. While Moscow speaks continually of the democratic camp, we speak continually of the free world. There is a significant difference in connotation, since the natural and usual context for the word "free" is an individual context. It appears too in the way in which Moscow handles such events as the trial of top Communists in the United States. The usual line is to claim that such persecution of "peace partisans" proves the opposition of the American ruling circles to peace; it is the opposition of the ruling circles to what the victim stands for, rather than the violation of his rights as an individual, that is emphasized.

b. Other references to individuals. Terms like enterprise, opportunity, individuality, private, one's own, personal preference are commoner in VOA material. The personal pronouns--I, me, we, us, you, your--are much more frequent. This reflects the greater "human interest" mentioned above, but also suggests a basic person-mindedness which goes beyond mere entertainment-mindedness.

c. More varied terms for democracy and tyranny. While the terms "democracy" and "democratic" occur with enormous frequency in Soviet broadcasts, as well as the terms "popular" and "people," the concept of democracy is not much elaborated or differentiated. There are few terms such as constitutionalism or representative government. On the negative side especially the VOA broadcasts show more differentiation. Corresponding to the Soviet term "ruling circles" and related words such as reactionary and monopolist, the VOA has a large armory of terms such as dictatorship, totalitarian, tyranny, serfdom, deified state, secret police, regimentation, slave labor.

(This is perhaps related to the Soviet tendency to identify democracy with class justice and to identify anti-democracy with class exploitation. They confuse government for the people with government by the people more often than we do. In a sense, therefore, their concept of democracy is at this point broader than ours, and terms like exploitation and oppression should be included under it.)

4. American Fact-Mindedness

The Soviet assumption in general seems to be that those who are in the wrong are necessarily wrong because of inherent evil or ill will rather than because of misunderstanding. This could be merely a matter of sound propaganda policy insofar as it applies to the "rulers" of the opposing camp; the need for basic simplicity probably necessitates painting them as wholly evil and calculating in their wickedness. There is, however, a strong tendency to apply it also to the followers in the opposing camp. The idea of the Western masses being misled by their capitalist rulers does occur in Soviet propaganda, but it is remarkably rare.

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The more usual position is the patently unrealistic one that "the people" in the West are already in "the democratic camp." It is doubtful whether this is sound propaganda policy. It must give many listeners the impression that Moscow has strayed far from reality, and it also fails completely to meet these non-Communist Westerners on their own mental ground. It therefore suggests that this is a real mental blindspot in the Soviet propagandists, and that they are relatively incapable of thinking in terms of varying degrees of knowledge and understanding. Their frames of reference are nearly always moral good vs. moral evil and strength vs. weakness rather than understanding vs. misunderstanding.

Greater American fact-mindedness is also suggested by the following characteristics of VOA propaganda:

a. More terms for inadequate knowledge. The VOA seems to use more terms such as knowledge, wisdom, reason, realism and understanding; and it certainly has a greater variety of non-condemnatory terms for inadequate knowledge, such as misunderstanding, being misled, losing one's way, hesitation, doubt, surprise. It also recognizes the existence of opinions as distinguished from having or not having The Truth; it uses the term "public opinion" more often, as well as terms like expressing an opinion, exchanging views, optimism, pessimism, etc.

b. More facts. The VOA is somewhat less inclined to rely on sweeping unsupported generalizations or on the phrase "as is known." In its commentaries the proportion of facts used as illustrations or proof is higher, and the ratio of news to commentary is probably higher. Also, although the VOA has very few neutral facts without clear propaganda implications, Moscow has practically none.

c. Less spelling out of interpretations. Whether wisely or unwisely, the Voice more often presents facts without rubbing the listener's face in its own interpretation of those facts. This policy certainly entails no great loss, since the implications are nearly always fairly clear; and there may be a great gain in appearance of objectivity. In any case, the policy shows greater sensitivity to the possibility of fact-mindedness in the listener.

d. Less denunciation; fewer epithets. This has already been mentioned as an indication of Soviet conflict-mindedness. It is also relevant at this point as an indication of a kind of emotionality which may interfere with fact-mindedness. Whether this kind of emotionality is a propaganda advantage requires empirical evidence. The most effective and genuinely hard-hitting kind of mud-slinging may be the kind which throws the most factual mud.

e. More historical material. In its "Do You Remember?" series as well as at many other points the Voice of America now uses historical material, and the amount of it is much greater than Moscow's. It seems likely that this makes our broadcasts seem much more substantial in the eyes of an intellectually curious and politically conscious listener.

f. More direct discussion of opponents' ideology. In its comment on Stalin's recent PRAVDA interview, for instance, the VOA gives some idea of the content of that interview. Both VOA and Moscow seem to have a fairly firm principle that the opponent's propaganda should not be dignified nor carried to new listeners by quoting or attacking it unnecessarily. There is a real question as to whether the VOA is not too similar to Moscow in this respect; it may appear to many listeners to be on a par with Moscow in evasiveness. But at least it is somewhat less evasive than Moscow is, and somewhat more ready to meet a skeptical listener on his own ideological ground.

g. More specific military and economic comparisons. Two especially interesting instances of greater factualness and specificity are the VOA's specific comparisons between East and West in economic success (production, standard of living) and military strength (e.g., number of divisions). The former is perhaps entirely interpretable as due to a capitalizing on the real fact of Western economic superiority; the West is now on a higher economic level, and the Voice would be foolish not to hammer the point home with comparisons as specific as possible. The reverse is true in the matter of military strength, however. It is therefore definitely noteworthy that Moscow relies on vague generalizations about the "mighty" Soviet Union rather than getting down to specific elements of strength, partly out of desire not to appear militaristic, partly not to give away military secrets, but partly in general lack of appreciation of the propaganda value of specific facts.

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5. Soviet Dichotomizing

It is noted above that the keynote of Soviet propaganda is the word "struggle." A closely related fact is that Soviet propaganda is characterized by an especially simple and rigid division of its world into two parts, one wholly black and the other wholly white. It is true that we dichotomize in the opposite way, but our black is not quite so wholly black, our white is not quite so wholly white, and the dichotomy itself does not quite so completely monopolize the whole picture. Soviet dichotomizing shows itself in several ways:

a. No self-disapproval. Unlike Moscow, the Voice has on occasion admitted that those on its side are not always in agreement on everything. It has also admitted that the West is weak in land strength—20 divisions in Western Europe, facing 170 Soviet divisions. Only Stalin has ever said anything comparable to this on the Soviet radio.

b. No approval of the enemy. The VOA once quoted an Indian who had been visiting Shanghai and who had a few words of approval for Mao's government. It had accomplished something, he said, in land reform and in reducing governmental corruption. Probably since 1946 Moscow has never given its opponents so much credit.

c. No disapproval of allies. The VOA has on occasion quoted people who expressed the idea that our allies should bear their full share of the burden of collective security, implying that they were not yet doing so. Moscow does not do this sort of thing.

d. Assertions of complete unity. To the VOA, Western unity is something that is urgently needed and is in process of being achieved; to Moscow, "democratic" unity is already complete and leaves nothing to be desired. Elections are unanimous, etc.

e. Blurring distinctions within the enemy camp. Moscow identifies Truman with Dewey and with Wall Street, Taft with Philip Murray and Norman Thomas, Blum with De Gaulle, Wall Street with Tito. All are "reactionary." The VOA shows a strong similar tendency (describing Mao, for instance, as a mere puppet of Stalin), but it probably does not carry the tendency as far as Moscow.

f. Blurring distinctions within one's own camp. To claim unity on matters of foreign policy is one thing; to give an impression of homogeneity in other respects is another. Moscow, for instance, blurs the distinction between its own socialism and the "people's democracy" in its satellites, and between the socialism which it has now and the communism toward which it is "marching." Cultural differences between the Ukrainians and the Great Russians, or between the Russians and the Chinese, might almost be non-existent as far as Soviet propaganda is concerned. The picture of the West which the VOA paints is a good deal more heterogeneous.

g. Non-adaptation to the psychology of specific audiences. Moscow, unlike the VOA, shows an amazing lack of interest in the specific national traditions, national susceptibilities, etc. of its various audiences. They are all treated as being alike in that they are battlegrounds between "the people" and Wall Street or its lackeys.

h. Ignoring issues other than the main one. Soviet propaganda ignores to an extreme degree cleavages such as that between India and Pakistan, or between Jews and Arabs, or between Catholics and Protestants. The VOA appears less extreme in this respect. Moscow also concentrates its own propaganda on a smaller number of subthemes than are used by the VOA.

6. Soviet Class-Mindedness

Although class thinking is far less prominent in present-day Soviet propaganda than in the classics of Marxism, it is nevertheless still somewhat more prominent than in VOA broadcasts. The word "people's" as applied to "democracy" has some class connotations, for instance, and the enemy is often identified as Wall Street, monopolists, reactionaries, etc.

7. American Religion and Tradition

a. Religion and ethics. While Soviet propagandists take pains not to antagonize religious people by attacking religion as such, they have only very rarely attempted to enlist religious sentiments actively on their side. In VOA broadcasts also religion as such is not a major theme, but it does occur. There is an appreciable frequency of words such as God, Jesus, Christian, holy, spiritual, faith, and prayer. There is also in VOA

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broadcasts a group of very broad ethical terms which may be psychologically associated with religion: ideals, ethical, moral strength, inner strength, purity of soul.

b. Tradition. Another cluster of terms used by the VOA which is difficult to interpret includes tradition, cultural heritage, way of life, and, on the negative side, "alien." It is possible that these represent the ethnocentric or nationalistic attitudes which in the past have been associated with political conservatism, or it is possible that they represent an anthropological appreciation of the organic unity of any given culture—others, as well as our own.

8. The Western Defensive Role

There is still another cluster of terms which cannot be grouped with those discussed up to this point because it seems to reflect not a cultural difference but a difference in the present political roles of East and West. In spite of the vigor of the Soviet "peace" campaign and of the Soviet attempt to pin the guilt of war and aggression on the ruling circles of the West, the Western defensive posture is reflected in the fact that the VOA has a much more differentiated set of terms associated with the defensive role than Moscow does: common peril, collective security, joint defense, integration of defense, resisting aggression, sad necessity, no appeasement, invading hordes, refugees, etc. The absence of the word "appeasement" in Soviet broadcasts is especially striking; Moscow does not say "we in the democratic camp cannot appease the imperialists." Perhaps, as in the rather crude attempts of the Soviet propagandists to appropriate the Western ideology of democracy and individual freedom, this is a case of taking over mechanically a few key words without taking over the complete cluster of ideas associated with the experience of being actually in a defensive position.

D. RESUME

1. Similarities

a. Same values invoked:

- 1) Peace, friendship
- 2) Democracy
- 3) National independence
- 4) Class justice
- 5) Economic welfare
- 6) Truthfulness
- 7) Anti-Nazism
- 8) Individual freedom (not stressed, but approved by Moscow)

b. Same propaganda principles:

- 1) Clearness
- 2) Simplicity
- 3) Factualness
- 4) Selection
- 5) Slanting
- 6) Impression of objectivity (e.g., in tone of voice)
- 7) Avoiding obvious lying on tangible facts
- 8) Distortion primarily in the intangibles (motivation, etc.)
- 9) Not attacking entrenched prejudices
- 10) Not dignifying opponent's position by quoting it
- 11) Distinguishing between rulers and people in enemy nations
- 12) Including audience with self in a larger unity
- 13) Not criticizing audience
- 14) Not grossly flattering audience
- 15) Pyramidal structure; a few broad themes and many subthemes
- 16) Blurring distinctions within enemy camp
- 17) Never (or almost never) giving credit to enemy
- 18) Never (or almost never) criticizing self or allies
- 19) Little or no means-end analysis
- 20) Conforming to policy of own government
- 21) Few, if any, facts without clear propaganda implications
- 22) Little on the atom bomb
- 23) Little specific material on military strength

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c. Similarities attributable to limitations of intelligence:

- 1) Not very much adaptation to specific audiences
- 2) Not very much talking in terms of listener's personal life

2. Differences

a. Soviet conflict-mindedness:

- 1) Greater frequency of denunciation
- 2) More military metaphors and words for physical violence
- 3) More words connoting suspicion
- 4) Fewer words representing the gentler virtues
- 5) Fewer words for moderation
- 6) Less reference to civilian life: home, children, etc.
- 7) More terms for determination
- 8) More terms for strength
- 9) More terms for unity (?)

b. American entertainment-mindedness:

- 1) More human interest
- 2) More humor
- 3) More variety
- 4) Evaluations in terms of interest

c. American individualism:

- 1) Individual freedom
- 2) Other references to individuals
- 3) More varied terms for democracy and tyranny

d. American fact-mindedness:

- 1) More terms for inadequate knowledge
- 2) More facts
- 3) Less spelling out of interpretations
- 4) Less denunciation; fewer epithets (same as a 1)
- 5) More historical material
- 6) More direct discussion of opponents' ideology
- 7) More specific military and economic comparisons

e. Soviet dichotomizing:

- 1) No self-disapproval
- 2) No approval of the enemy
- 3) No disapproval of allies
- 4) Assertions of complete unity
- 5) Blurring distinctions within the enemy camp
- 6) Blurring distinctions within one's own camp
- 7) Non-adaptation to the psychology of specific audiences
- 8) Ignoring issues other than the main one

f. Soviet class-mindedness.

g. American religion and tradition:

- 1) Religion and ethics
- 2) Tradition (and ethnocentrism?)

h. The Western defensive role.